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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of home schooling is increasing. Parents educate their children at home for the sake of security, morality, and educational quality. Not only does home schooling offer the advantages of closeness and security, but advocates also assert that education in the home results in greater reading proficiency. On the other hand, antagonists point out the lack of opportunity for socialization in home education and the inability of parents to cover all academic areas. Administrators who oppose home schooling also fear a decrease in state aid because of a drop in enrollment. But administrators are advised not to prosecute home schooling families. Instead, districts and home schooling families need to cooperate. (RG)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management

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HOME SCHOOLING

Increasing numbers of parents are choosing to educate their children at home, for reasons of security, morality, and educational quality. Public school officials are concerned about home schools' lack of accreditation and the loss to their districts of enrollment-based state aid. Nevertheless, legal authorities generally advise school officials to cooperate with home-schooling families.

How prevalent is home schooling?

Although experts in the field vary in their estimates, most generally agree that home schooling is on the rise. The late John Holt, of the Boston-based home instruction support organization Holt Associates, estimated that 10,000 to 20,000 families in the U.S. were teaching their children at home. After polling suppliers of home-instruction materials, Patricia M. Lines (1986) estimated that 50,000 children in grades K-8 were in home schools. Raymond Moore, president of the Hewitt Research Center, places the figure at a quarter million students.

Parents' reasons for educating children at home appear quite clear: safety, security, morality, and educational quality. Feeling that today's public schools place undue pressures on students because of drug abuse, crime, and a general lack of discipline and control, some parents embrace the immediate positive aspects of home schooling.

Many educators, however, fear that a marked increase in home schooling will add to the economic plight of school districts nationwide. But it seems highly unlikely, even if present rates of growth continue for a generation, that more than 2 or 3 percent of the families in the U.S. will choose to teach their own children. In comparison, private schools now enroll about 12 percent of the nation's children.

A factor often overlooked is that families who opt for home schooling tend to weave back and forth between home schooling and regular schooling every few years. It is not a permanent choice. These families each year seem to be trying to find the best possible education for their children.

Is home schooling educationally sound?

Detractors of home schooling point to several potential problems:

1. lack of opportunity for socialization
2. parents' inability to cover all intellectual areas
3. absence of sufficient equipment, particularly in science
4. inattention to the basic skills

Proponents, on the other hand, claim that many children in home schools have experienced dramatic improvement in reading and other basic skills. When children in home schools are instructed only to read what they like, and given great amounts of uninterrupted time devoid of checking and testing, their reading skills rise significantly (Holt). Proponents point out that many public school systems in the U.S. devote only a short time to such "sustained silent reading."

The flexibility of curriculum and schedule, the closeness and emotional unity of the home, and the security possible in the home environment enhance educational learning and growth (Holt, Divoky). The absence of professional distance is also cited as a plus for home schooling. Proponents of home schools also stress the possibilities for testing new theories and formulas for teaching. They point out that, due to numerous legal strictures and cost and time inflexibility, new theories are difficult to implement in public school systems.

What are the laws governing home schooling?

Laws applying to home instruction vary from state to state. The three basic types of state compulsory education statutes (and the number of states that have adopted them) are as follows:

1. those that provide no exception beyond the alternatives to public and private schools (1 state)
2. those that provide an implied exception for home schooling by broadly interpreting phrases in the law such as "equivalent education elsewhere" or like

phrases (11 states)
3. those that provide an explicit exception for home schooling (29 states)

In the nine remaining states, home schooling is legal by virtue of court decisions, attorney general rulings, or state board decisions. Thus, only one state (Texas) prohibits home schooling.

The laws governing home schooling usually concern themselves with three issues: whether or not home instruction qualifies as equivalent to the institutional, group-learning experience; whether home instruction constitutes and can fall under the precepts of a "private" school; and whether First Amendment considerations focusing on separation of church and state apply to home schooling.

Why is home schooling controversial?

Accreditation and money are the major concerns linked to the home schooling issue. Some superintendents are genuinely concerned that students in unaccredited programs may not acquire the essential skills for good citizenship and further learning.

Many state officials recognize that the trend toward home schooling will siphon off students and thus enrollment-based state aid from public schools. Because of this threat of diminished state aid, some superintendents engage parents in lawsuits in an attempt to stop the flow of students from their school districts.

John Holt has listed three assumptions made by some public school administrators that may be at the heart of home school growth:

1. Children are not much interested in learning.
2. Children are not very good at learning.
3. Children are unlikely to learn anything of substance unless it is taught to them by adults.

Home school advocates think these points are false and base their approach to education on that fact.

What should public school administrators do about home schooling?

Lines (1983) advises public school administrators would be wise to refrain from prosecuting home-schooling families. The school districts lose in the majority of such cases. It costs a lot of time and money to take such cases through the courts; the school districts receive a great deal of unfavorable publicity; the school districts lose many more cases than they win; and when school districts do win cases, families usually exercise their option of moving from the district or state and making the same case elsewhere.

Lines stresses the need for school districts and school administrators to work with, and not against, home-schooling families. Such cooperation "demands new relationships between state and local education officials and between public and private educational systems.

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